

My unanimous consent request at this time is that Senator MIKULSKI be recognized for 7½ minutes as in morning business.

The PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered. The Senator from Maryland.

PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

Ms. MIKULSKI. I thank the Chair, and, Mr. President, I thank my colleagues for their courtesy, particularly Senator DORGAN. I am very appreciative.

Mr. President, seniors are facing a crisis, and it is caused by the high cost of prescription drugs. For so many years, Congress has talked about prescription drugs in Medicare.

Let me tell you what my seniors say: Talk, talk, talk. They are fed up with our talk, and they want us to take action. They tell me: You can't talk yourself out of high cholesterol; you need Lipitor. You can't talk your way out of diabetes; you need insulin.

The problem with the Senate, they say, is when all gets said and done, more gets said than gets done. The time for talking is over, and we need to listen to the seniors, to business, and we need to act.

I have been in communities all over Maryland, from diners to boardrooms, listening to seniors who are desperate, listening to their families who want to help their parents and listening to employers in boardrooms who really want to help their retirees but are wondering if they can afford to do so.

Here is what they tell me: Congress must do something about the prescription drug benefit, and they want us to do it now to help our seniors, our families, business, and our economy.

There are several different plans floating around, and a lot of them have wonderful new language: Medicare Choice, Medicare Advantage, et cetera. I am not sure what will happen, but what I know is, we must have a meaningful prescription drug benefit, not just slogans and sound bites, not just something out of the Heritage Foundation, not something out of a think tank, but something that enables seniors to afford the prescription drugs, which they paid for the research to develop.

I have five principles for a prescription drug benefit. These principles are the yardstick by which I am going to measure any proposal.

First, the cornerstone of any prescription drug benefit must be Medicare. It must be in Medicare. It must stay in Medicare. Medicare must be the cornerstone. I am absolutely opposed to the privatization of Medicare either overtly or covertly. Let me repeat, I am absolutely opposed to the privatization of Medicare.

Any prescription drug benefit that has a private insurance component to it must be in addition to a Medicare benefit, not in lieu of a Medicare benefit. It must keep a traditional Medi-

care component to it. Any private insurance program must be an option, and it must not be mandatory.

That goes to my second principle: voluntary. No one should be coerced or forced into a private program or forced to give up coverage if they already have it.

It must be affordable. Benefits must be affordable to business and affordable to seniors. That means a definite premium and a reasonable copayment.

It must be accessible, available to all seniors regardless of where they live, and it must be portable so they can take it with them if they visit their grandchildren in another State.

It must be meaningful and genuine. It must cover the drugs that doctors say they need, not what insurance executive gatekeepers say they are willing to give them.

Let's talk about the meaningful benefit. Congress cannot leave this up to the insurance companies.

We have been down that road in Maryland, and it was a rocky road, not only filled with potholes but with landmines. We had something called Medicare+Choice that turned out to be nothing more than a racket for seniors to be gouged and abandoned in my own State. I am not going to support any more rackets or gimmicks under the illusion of being able to help our seniors. Insurance companies came in. Seniors were going to have choice. They ended up with no choice and no coverage. The companies came in. They took the money from our seniors. Then they said, oh, it is too expensive to do this, and they left town. They left over 100,000 Maryland seniors without coverage. We are not going to go that way.

So I do not trust the insurance companies to be there for the seniors. Getting rid of Medicare by forcing them into this is not going to be the way we go. Medicare is the answer. Medicare is not the problem.

I believe honor thy mother and father is not just a good commandment to live by, it is good public policy to govern by. That is why I feel so strongly about Medicare. Congress created Medicare to provide a safety net for seniors. In 1965, seniors' biggest fear was the cost of hospital care. One heart attack could put a family into bankruptcy. That is what Medicare Part A is all about. Then Congress added Medicare Part B to help seniors pay for doctor visits, an important step to keep seniors healthy and financially secure.

New advances in medicine mean seniors are living longer. New treatments and therapies such as prescription drugs prolong life and maintain quality of life. These costs were not envisioned in 1965.

So as we look at this problem, we need to know that Medicare has served the Nation well. Now we know it is time to expand it to a prescription drug benefit. We have covered hospitalization. We have covered doctor visits. Yet because of the advances in medical science in this country, pre-

scription drugs and medical devices save lives and help manage chronic conditions such as high blood pressure and diabetes. This is what we need to be focusing on. Let's focus on the American people for a change and not on the so-called hollow opportunities of structural reform. It is a problem for middle class families. Families worry about their jobs and the weak economy. They do not know how they are going to take care of their children and their elderly parents.

American businesses are wondering about things such as legacy costs, and small business is wondering how they can afford health insurance as well. A lot of companies want to do the right thing for their employees and retirees. They want to offer comprehensive health care benefits, but they are struggling under the cost. That is why I fought for tax incentives for small businesses to provide health coverage for their employees. But those who supported the tax bill care more about special breaks for Joe Billionaire than about basic health care for families.

Our businesses do not get any help, but their competitors sure do. The playing field is not level. When competitors in other countries do not have to pay for prescription drug coverage because they have a national health care system, in my own State of Maryland this means people are losing jobs in the automobile industry and the steel industry. That is why I fought for tax incentives for small businesses to provide health coverage for their employees, but those who supported the tax bill care more about special breaks for Joe Billionaire than about basic health care for families.

We have to get real, and the first place we have to get real is to have a real prescription drug benefit. The Nation cannot afford to do nothing. Prescription drugs are lifelines to millions of Americans. They enable seniors to prevent and manage disease. Without access to medication, seniors are going to end up with trips to the hospital, longer hospital stays, more visits to emergency rooms.

All the great research done at NIH is meaningless if people cannot afford the cures. It is time to make prescription drug coverage a national priority so we can help our seniors, families, American business, and our economy.

When we stand up for America, we stand up for what America stands for, which is a safety net for our seniors and really helping our families be able to help themselves.

By passing a real prescription drug benefit, Congress will deliver real security to America's seniors. Retirement security means more pension security. Seniors need healthcare security to be at ease in their retirements. In today's world, we cannot have healthcare security without prescription drug coverage. Congress must keep this promise to America's seniors.

I now yield the floor, but if they come in with some more gimmicks, I will not yield the floor in this debate.